Covid-19: is there a gagging order?

Covid-19 continues to have a significant impact on health and the economy, but questions to political leaders are met with a wall of silence

by Juliet Green — 13-09-2024 10:03 in **Health**, **Human interest** Reading Time: 7 mins AA

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scientifically literate lay persons, or people who are clinically vulnerable or have been harmed by the infection – for some time there has been criticism that political leaders and mainstream journalists are inexplicably stonewalling.

Covid-19 is everywhere and nowhere

Covid-19 has wryly been named 'Coldemort' on social media, as the disease about which we must not speak. Pundit avoidance feels so practised now that it was a bit of a shock to hear the word in the mouths of presenters at the Paris Olympics. It was almost as if the announcement that US sprinter Noah Lyles had raced (without winning the expected gold) while infected with Covid-19 slipped out before they had the chance to self-censor. Notably, the video has now been removed.

More commonly, Covid-19 is labelled the "the elephant in every room" – cognitive dissonance played out in absurd events across the world. A US presidential candidate declares the pandemic over and two years later, is infected again with the virus that ends his campaign. The first "post-Covid" Olympics is noticeably not: the virus makes headlines when it impacts performances but there is less fanfare when volunteers resign citing lack of mitigations. A US party conference announces a "surprise guest" and the world-weary joke is that the guest was Covid but it was no surprise.

The irreconcilable contradiction between pretending Covid-19 is gone and the reality of what it continues to do, induces collective face-palming from those who are aware. There is a sense of disbelief and frustration evident on social media, to the extent that some dogged posters take every opportunity to demand answers about infection control or air quality or disease surveillance. It is easy to imagine the annoyed eye-rolls by those being questioned but the overwhelming response appears to be no response.

Crumbs of hope

Some optimism persists with the hope that a public figure will speak up or at least allow a discussion. On rare occasions, a radio host may accept a phone-in from a long Covid-19

But even as recently as the election, Covid conscious voters scrutinised the party manifestos but found meagre scraps. The LibDems scored points against the Greens because *their* clean air policy included indoor air. The Labour Party promised to implement the findings of the Covid inquiry but only as a historical framing and not an ongoing threat. Crucial evidence is being presented to the inquiry in the current session, but the Labour government has said nothing. None of the manifestos offered to reinstate universal vaccination, surveillance and reporting nor to improve public health and infection control to protect their citizens.

Why then and not now?

There were higher hopes when the Labour government announced its cabinet and Andrew Gwynne, the new Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Public Health and Prevention, himself a long Covid sufferer, had as his very first listed responsibility health protection: Covid-19. He had posted before on long Covid and had spoken on it in parliament. Since the election, he has engaged on RSV, measles, HIV and ME, but a search of his X feed brings up no mention of Covid since March 2024, despite repeated prodding from followers.

Similarly, in opposition, Bridget Philipson took the government to task for failing on ventilation in schools. Now, as Minister of State for Education, she insists that all children must be in school under exactly the same conditions. She has not mentioned ventilation nor replied to anyone asking about indoor air quality or reminding her that illness is the main reason for absence.

It is much the same for the Greens. As I write, Carla Denyer, the co-leader, is missing conference due to a “Covid-like” infection. This is the first time she has mentioned it since 2022, apart from once this year, referring to it in the past as the time when we clapped for the doctors. Yet in June of 2022 she was on BBC Points West pushing hard for support for sufferers of long Covid.

What is going on?

There is speculation, but no certainty, about the reasons for the silent treatment. If it stems from a belief that Covid-19 is trivial, we should at least expect this as a response. Maybe there

complacency in the wider population and this is a problem. Covid-19 has not become less dangerous just because it is not talked about, but in spite of the statistics (more than 7,000 official UK Covid-19 deaths so far in 2024 and 400 million long Covid sufferers worldwide) there is genuine surprise from people that they can still be infected, still be seriously ill in the acute stage and still get long Covid as a result.

And perhaps this is the nub of it. If Covid-19 is acknowledged, then there would be accountability. Things would need to be done differently and that is simply too much effort.

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